

Anna Walker

Room for St John of the Cross by Bill Viola

Essay on Humility

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The pearl I have chosen today to explore humility is '*Room for St. John of the Cross*.' The artwork is a layered video and sound installation by Bill Viola, created in 1983 based on the life of St John of the Cross, the 16th century Spanish Catholic mystic, poet and saint. In 1985, it was the centrepiece of Viola's MoMA New York retrospective and was seen as important for both Viola and MoMA — it was MoMA's first solo exhibition to feature a video artist installed in the contemporary exhibition galleries rather than the usual video gallery, and for Viola it was a turning point in his arts practice.

Slide 3: Play Video

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The whole experience is an orchestrated journey through space and time.

The viewer enters the installation through a door on the left and steps into a darkened room. A noisy and rumbling roar reverberates through the darkness. On the back wall, a large, chaotic and constantly moving grainy black and white projection of a mountain trembles and vibrates. In the centre of the space is an enclosed miniature chamber with a small window that emits a faint light. It takes a while to navigate one's body in the space, for one's eyes to become accustomed to the dark. Drawn to the structure in the centre of the room, the viewer tentatively navigates the darkness and bends down uncomfortably to peer through the open window. Inside the chamber there is a dirt floor, a table with a tiny monitor showing a static image of a mountain, a metal pitcher with water, and a glass also filled with water. Audible in the chamber is the whispered poetry of St John of The Cross, written while he was imprisoned in a room similar to this one, for 9 months, the usual time it takes for a foetus to gestate.

The initial impression upon stepping into the room is one of noise and overwhelm. The sound is loud and ominous, the moving imagery on the back wall is unstable. There is a brief moment of peace when the viewer leans in through the window as the poetry of St John, spoken in Spanish, washes over them. The contained motionless mountain view on the small video monitor signals a frozen moment in time.

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The small television, the pitcher and the water glass were chosen by the artist as recognisable objects to link the viewer to identify inwardly with the artwork. They are domestic objects intended to make the encounter personal. Viola was pinpointing the now while making connections to the past.

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The imagery on the back wall of Viola's installation also plays to what is familiar. The moving and blurred trees, sky, and the mountains are there to connect the viewer to travel, to the dream world, and to the subconscious. The actual footage was shot by Viola in the Sierra Mountains in California from the open window of a car; the sound is the wind amplified rushing by the camera microphone. The loud heavy roar of the storm locates the viewer in the space and can be felt low in the body—to ground and anchor the viewer in the room. The murmuring whispers of the male voice reciting the poetry of St John connect to the viewer differently, they speak to the heart, provide comfort from the storm that rages beyond the tiny cubicle.

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In Viola's words:

"I do not distinguish between inner and outer landscapes, between the environment as the physical world out there (the 'hard' stuff) and the mental image of that environment within each and every individual (the 'soft' stuff). It is the tension, the transition, the exchange, and the resonance between these two modalities that energize and define our reality. The key agent in this exchange of energies is the image, and this 'space between' is precisely the place in which the work operates. (Viola, 1995: 149)

It is the place of affect. Anthropologist Kathleen Stewart writes about affect coming into view through attuning oneself to the forms and forces unfolding in scenes and encounters, where objects are to be 'walked around or seen as states of being, 'emergent, or suspended in potentiality' (2017).

So, what is the potential here?

There is a complexity in *Room for St John of The Cross* that I appreciate, it both captures and mirrors St John's life and writing, and my ongoing journey to understand humility. It also represents for me, a thinking through to becoming.

Viola's installations deal with big themes: human consciousness, birth, death, love, emotion, and spirituality. Throughout his career, the artist has been inspired by the mystical traditions of Zen Buddhism, Christian mysticism and Islamic Sufism. In addition, his aesthetics are layered with the subject and manner of Western and Renaissance medieval devotional art.

Slide 8: St John of The Cross

Very briefly St John of the Cross, was born Juan de Yepes in Fontiveros, a small village in the province of Ávila, Spain, June 24, 1542. He grew up poor despite his noble lineage.

Juan's father died 7 months after his birth, leaving the family destitute. With his mother and brother, they travelled from place to place until they reached Medina del Campo in 1551. There John worked in a hospital for people with incurable diseases, and thereafter studied humanities at a Jesuit school from 1559-1563. In 1563, he became a Carmelite monk and studied theology and philosophy at the university in Salamanca, and in 1567 he was ordained as a priest. Around that time, he met the nun Teresa of Ávila and joined her cause of reforming the Carmelite order and founded the Discalced Carmelites—discalced meaning barefoot—an order which adopted a stricter rule of conduct. This did not go down well with other Carmelites who had become complacent in their religious practice, and in 1575-76 John was kidnapped and imprisoned at Medina del Campo, before being freed by the intervention of the Papal Nuncio, Ormaneto. He was captured for a second time in 1577 and imprisoned at Toledo for 9 months until he managed to escape in August 1578.

It was while he was imprisoned in 1577 that he wrote some of his most mystical poetry and prose.¹

Why St John of The Cross, and why have I chosen Viola's installation as a pearl?

I have always been interested in the religious, the sacred, and spiritual in art. As a child I was fascinated by miracles, saints, and martyrs, one of the outcomes of a growing up in a strict Irish Catholic household, and a parochial education under the stern tutelage of nuns. My first knowledge of a naked man's body was Christ on the cross. My first understanding of pain, trauma, and torture was through the bible and religious education. My relationship to my body, my femaleness, my sexuality was forged out of these experiences. I watched my parents rage one minute and the next sit quietly and peacefully rosary in hand slowing down the world, creating a moment of peace from the pressures of the bills, their children, work, of being immigrants in a country so close in proximity but so foreign and unwelcome. I mention all of this because for me it was the beginning of unravelling humility, which was then linked to what I perceived as a forced sense of gratitude that arose out of fear and suffering and had a lot to do with my parent's immigrant status, of not wanting to rock the boat, not wanting to be seen as different, or excluded, or thrown out of a country that wasn't their place of origin.

Later my fascination with saints, with Christ, with martyrs was linked to the desire to push the boundaries, an unwillingness to accept rules and regulations, and the desire to seek the extraordinary in the mundane, to experience the sublime, to know what is

¹ *Whenever St. Teresa referred to him she seemed almost obliged to use the diminutive. In describing his imprisonment, she writes: "For the whole nine months he was in a small prison where, little as he is, there was not enough room for him to move." He was also thin, but his lean, oval face and his broad forehead, receding into baldness, gave him a venerable appearance. His nose was slightly aquiline, his eyes dark and large. Rounding off this figure of Fray John was his old, rough, brown habit and a white cloak so coarse it seemed made of goat hair. (Trans., by Kavanaugh & Rodriguez, 1991)*

ecstasy, to explore what exists beyond the limits, which I found in art, in music, in David Bowie, in dancing, but mostly in words.

Preparing this lecture, I revisited 'The Gospel According to Jesus Christ' by the Portuguese writer Jose Saramago.

Towards the end of the book, Jesus confronts the God and the Devil –
This is the conversation:

"[...] I'm waiting [...] for You to tell me how much death and suffering Your victory over other gods will cost, how much suffering and death will be needed to justify the battles men will fight in Your name and mine, [...]"

God replies "[...] its foundations will be dug out in flesh, and the bases made from the cement of abnegation, tears, suffering, torment, every conceivable form of death known, or as yet unrevealed, [...]"

And from there in alphabetical order, for the next four pages, Saramago lists every saint's violent death. (1993, 290-294). Every time I read these pages I am in floods of tears. As I read I try to take my time, and I ritually and slowly pronounce every saint's name, as if in prayer, as if they are known to me, as if I was once acquainted with them.

It is the same feeling I have when I enter Viola's installation, *Room for St John of the Cross*. As I make my way through the space I am reminded of the fragility of the human body, the ease that others assume to torture, maim, harm, destroy and break that body, and I am humbled. I am also alerted to the resilience of the human spirit, of the desire to survive and to love, and once again I am humbled.

As I lean down to look through the window I begin to register in my body how St John suffered. Imprisoned in this tiny cell, which was once a latrine, and unable to stand up I imagine him crouched in the corner. Hungry, without the proper clothing, exposed to the extremes of weather; I hear the taunts of his jailers as he was regularly beaten, and humiliated. His wounds did not heal for years. He endured nine months of this treatment and yet he later acknowledged that never in his life had he experienced such an abundance of supernatural light as when incarcerated. Indeed, he considered the Calced friars great benefactors, and told a Carmelite nun, Ana de San Alberto: "Ana, my child, one single grace of all those that God granted me there, could not be repaid by many years of imprisonment." (St. John of the Cross, by Fr. Bruno de Jésus-Marie, O.C.D., New York, Sheed and Ward, 1957).

Take a moment – breathe.
I'm going to meander here...

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In 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Walter Benjamin claims that through the invention of photography and film, understanding the visual arts radically changed. He used the word 'aura' to describe a work of art as a:

"[...] unique phenomenon of [its] distance, however close it may be," the art's sacredness and individuality, its positioning at a unique point in space and time, a feature which permits the art work to remain at a certain insuperable distance, unapproachable to the observer." (Benjamin, 1968, 221)

Benjamin was referring to the excess of meaning that attaches to any symbolic entity. At the same time, aura, refers to a special status or resonance that emanates from the position of the artwork or text that can be identified as traditional, or classic. For example, standing before a painting by Rembrandt at the National Gallery, one looks and sees the play of light on the bodies of Jesus and the angel, and experiences what it is to be touched by that light. The aura of the artwork is unique to the space it is in and to the relationship between the viewer and the painting. Because the aura is linked to presence, for Benjamin replicas fail to capture the artwork's original essence, and so in his view, photography, and film fail to fulfil that same experience. Through the mechanical reproduction of film, and photography the authenticity of the original, its uniqueness is lost. In his words:

"Its social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage." (Benjamin, 221)

In Viola's practice technology is an essential component to the artworks, it is intrinsic. And yet, he successfully manages to transcend the detrimental effect of technological reproduction that Benjamin decries, and creates spaces that are authentic, meaningful and embedded with aura. Whether we are immersed in an installation or bearing witness before a video screen we experience Viola's spiritual intent, responding to the contemplative and emotional environments he has created.

This is not exclusive to Room for St John of the Cross.

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Martyrs (Earth, Air, Fire, Water) from 2014, was installed as a permanent installation in St Pauls Cathedral. It consists of four colour vertical plasma screens, each showing a single figure who are overwhelmed by the onslaught of a natural force: earth, air, fire and water.

Viola, reflecting on the Greek word for martyr, which means 'witness', explained that the martyrs 'exemplify the human capacity to bear pain, hardship and even death in order to remain faithful to their values, beliefs and principles.' Like *Room for St John of the Cross*, *Martyrs* is a study in suffering and redemption and offers a contemporary contemplation on life, death and the afterlife. In the installation, four martyrs undergo

extreme fates, such as: (i) burial, (ii) being hung by the wrists with bound ankles, (iii) seated in flames, (iv) and hanging upside while being drenched in cascades of water.

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Similar to Viola's *Room for St John of the Cross*, there seems to be a fine line between living, dying and hope. The reversal of time in *Martyrs* is a reminder of transformation: soil moves in an upward movement, the woman raises her eyes and loosens her bonds, the flames begin to fade, and the man drenched in water ascends. These martyrs do not scream, or flail around they silently and calmly await their fate. They endure and their endurance inspires hope, awe, humility, and a sense of peace.

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'Mary' followed *Martyrs* in October 2016. A set of silent multi-channel installations also comprising vertical video screens, showing different depictions of the life of the Mother of Christ. The central monitor extends higher than the outer channels to form a classic triptych altarpiece configuration. Viola places equal emphasis on the physical arrangement of the screens and the structures that support them as he does on their content. As altarpieces, the artworks provide a symbolic space for contemplation and devotion within the cathedral. The video is just over 13 mins on a loop and is structured in 5 parts: Mother and Child; Mary's Journey; Scenes from Mary's Life; Mary's Dream; and the Pietà. It begins with a shot of a female black monk breastfeeding a child against a bustling backdrop of Los Angeles that rushes through time from morning to night. She moves in slow motion, nurturing and feeding the baby in her arms.

Viola presents us with a set of devotional dichotomies: comfort and creation, suffering and sacrifice. He offers us a contemporary perspective of Mary as a universal female figure referencing Eastern as well as Western religions. As the artist has stated: '[Mary] is the personification of the feminine principle, related to ideas of creativity, procreation, inner strength, love, and compassion ... As "container of the uncontainable", Mary encompasses all spiritual life.' (Viola, 2016)

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Mary (the installation) once again explores Viola's cycle of life, death and renewal. The breast-feeding Mary gives way to another woman wandering through a majestic landscape of rocks, water and forest, which references Revelations, 12: 6 — 'and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days'.

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The final section of the artwork is an image of Mary caressing Jesus's lifeless body in her lap, representing the traditional Pietà scene from the Life of Christ. Viola has described

this final scene as 'the embodiment of eternal sorrow. This vision of death among the ruins represents an ailing and wounded humanity that Mary carries alone, providing a place of refuge and solace in the intimate sharing of grief and pain that her image as an icon offers to those who seek comfort.' (Viola, 2016)

Seeing the work, I recall examples within art history.

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Michelangelo (1475-1564) The Lamentation over the Dead Christ c. 1540 Black chalk. 28.1 x 26.8cm

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Caspar David Friedrich's, *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, from 1818, which depicts a man standing upon a rocky precipice with his back to the viewer. He gazes out over a landscape covered in a thick sea of fog. Rocky ridges, trees, and mountains pierce the mist and seem to travel into the distance indefinitely. The painting was considered one of the central pieces of the Romantic Movement, and has been widely interpreted as a study on self-reflection, a contemplation of life's path evoking the sublime presence of nature.

And next to it, John Ruskin, a portrait by John Everett Millais, from 1853, where Ruskin stands on the rocky edge of a cascading waterfall. Millais was directly responding to Ruskin's arguments for detail and truthful representation. In his painting, he carefully renders the individualised facial features of his subject, the particular grooves in his hat, and the design of clothing and shoes. The realism captures a precise moment, a moment of quiet reflection and of meditation.

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Viola's artworks emit the sacred and standing before them feels ceremonial. They are not only designed to be not just witnessed but also absorbed, challenging the traditional role of audiences. The power of his artworks, lies in the transformative ability to shift the audience's perceptions as they move through the world. As he comments, "Part of our nature as human beings is a spiritual dimension, not simply the expression of religion." (Viola, 2009). He creates spaces where the audience becomes part of the experience and thus, part of the artwork. As viewers, we peer into the darkness of his installations, or stand before a wall of videos and become witnesses to the fragilities of the human experience in a way that is both comforting and unsettling. He lures us into a place where it is our body that we see or sense on the screen, making universal connections between all bodies, past and present. The violence we see hinted at is not delivered through blood or pain, through cries of anguish, it is subtle, mystical, it moves us to consider our bodies in the spiritual, in the sublime

Which leads me to a very brief mention of Immanuel Kant's (1724–1804) discourse on

the differences between the sublime and the beautiful.

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For Kant, the sublime must have a sense of the dread:

“The sublime must always be large, the beautiful can also be small. The sublime must be simple, the beautiful can be decorated and ornamented. A great height is just as sublime as a great depth, but the latter is accompanied with the sensation of shuddering, the former with that of admiration; hence the latter sentiment can be terrifyingly sublime and the former noble.” (Kant, trans. 2011, 17)

He claims we are more powerfully effected by the sublime than by the beautiful, “but that without variation or accompaniment by the latter the former is tiring and cannot be enjoyed as long.” He stresses the need for both, for: “[t]he sentiments of the sublime stretch the powers of the soul more forcefully and therefore tire more quickly.” (17)

On the other hand, Edmund Burke, in *A Philosophical Inquiry*, articulates the sublime closer to what I would describe as the *affect* of something —or the uncanny— how experiencing otherwise terrifying phenomena from a position of safety can elicit ‘a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquillity tinged with terror; which, as it belongs to self-preservation, is one of the strongest of all the passions’.

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He writes: “the sublime is an idea belonging to self-preservation. That it is therefore one of the most affecting we have. That its strongest emotion is an emotion of distress, and that no pleasure from a positive cause belongs to it.” (Burke, 79) The experience of the sublime was, for Burke, more valuable than the experience of the beautiful, it is an “examination of our passions in our breasts.”

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The sublime² is about awe — standing on the beach amidst an incredible storm, watching the waves crash, I am humbled in the wake of nature’s sublimity. My experience is filled with dread at: my fragility, my transient presence and the inability to affect the storm that rages around me. I do not feel the fullness or the bigness of this experience when I walk into *Room for St John of the Cross*, but I am reminded of that feeling, it vibrates within, and the gushing sound that fills the room moves into my body like the roar of the ocean, as the mountain above me shakes. Viola triggers my memory,

² There is another word: numinosity that is apt here. Coined by Rudolf Otto in 1923, a numinous event evokes a reaction of silence, it also provokes terror, describes a feeling that is entirely different from anything experienced in ordinary life. The numinous is a mystery, an inchoate awareness of sacred presence.

which was something I was thinking about last night after Cheryl's and Vittorio's presentation.

Viola plays with our understanding of time in his installations. In *Room for St John of the Cross* it is a cumulative experience. The rumbling, shaking video footage of the mountain on repeat, never ceasing, relentless, is time's continuum, as are the quiet whispers of St John's poetry, also on repeat. As we walk through the space we walk back through time, into the past to a specific period in St. John's life. And, then we move back to the present, as we interact with Viola's prepared environment. The installation cannot be grasped all at once, or seen from just one position. It has to be walked through, and experienced, temporal like a performance, as such our actions become part of that performance. The lowering of our bodies to the window is like being brought to our knees as if in prayer, in supplication. Indeed, as I kneel to look through the window, I am surprised not to feel the dirt floor beneath my knees. All at once, the tiny cell becomes a confessional, the whispered words—the priest's absolution. I am not only visiting St John's life, I am once again a child, kneeling and praying.

The dictionary definition of 'humility'³ characterises it as "the state or quality of being humble, of freedom from pride and arrogance, a modest estimate of one's worth, [and, also] an act of submission and courtesy" The word *humility* is also closely linked with nature, with the earth. The English word 'humility' is derived from the Old French *umelite*—modesty and sweetness, and the Latin, *humilitas* — humble, but also 'well-grounded', or 'from the earth'. The word *humus* in Latin means 'earth'.

Viola talks of his relationship to the earth:

"Nature also attracts me in a spiritual sense: I try to explore the intrinsic laws of the cosmos, in its transcendent dimension, to better understand the habitat of the human being. Arrogant behaviour towards nature only leads to destruction; we must adopt a more reverent attitude towards it, as we are its guests. In fact, observation of animals has taught me many things about the behaviour of the human being." (2009)

This earthiness of humility is found in St John's imprisoned experience, locked in a cell with nothing but the dirt floor beneath him, and in his desire to reform the Carmelites to a barefoot way of being in the world — which is to feel the *humus*, the earth through direct contact, to walk always feeling the earth with one's head bowed low in humility, gazing downwardly and inwardly.

Room for St John of the Cross was a significant demarcation for Viola from his earlier

³ (i) a self-view of being 'nothing special' without masochistic disavowal of one's assets, (ii) an emotional state of gratitude and tenderness, (iii) a cognitive attitude of openness to learning and considering one's state of knowledge as non-exhaustive, (iv) a behavioural style of interacting with others with attention, respect, and politeness, and (v) an experiential capacity for surrender and awe.

work, he recalls it as a “coming out”, creating an artwork amidst “intense” criticism, based on the suffering and ordeal of a Christian saint (“everything those guys hate”). For Viola, it was a declaration that despite the criticism, he was an artist that had an interest in spiritual things. This installation and those that followed have taken him and us, as viewers, on a long journey to understand the meaning of humility.

In his installation, we embrace the trembling presence of nature while being made aware of the fragility of what it means to be human. Held by the poetry of St John, we are reminded of humanities’ resilience when pushed to the limit. As we step into the darkness of the installation we too are incarcerated invited to contemplate the meaning of his, and therefore our suffering. In St John’s poems he speaks of love, humility, spiritual ecstasy, of his soul, free from captivity flying over walls and mountains. As such, we are being asked, what would it take for us to behave in this way? Could we, like St John rise above suffering and forgive our tormentors and come into contact with transcendence?

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To reach satisfaction in all,
desire its possession in nothing.
To come to the knowledge of all,
desire the knowledge of nothing.
To come to possess all,
desire the possession of nothing.
To arrive at being all,
desire to be nothing.

To come to the pleasure you have not,
you must go by a way in which you enjoy not.
To come to the knowledge you have not,
you must go by a way in which you know not.
To come to the possession you have not,
you must go by a way in which you possess not.

To come to be what you are not,
you must go by a way in which you
are not.

When you turn toward something,
you cease to cast yourself upon the all.
For to go from the all to the all,
you must leave yourself in all.
And when you come to the possession of all,
you must possess it without wanting anything.

In this nakedness the spirit finds its rest,
for when it covets nothing,

nothing raises it up,
and nothing weighs it down,
because it is in the center of its humility. (St. John of the Cross)

Slide 22 - Mountain

Conclusion

I was thinking last night about the relationship between humility and *loving kindness*, the first of the *Brahma-vihara* or the four sublime states taught by the Buddha as a way of being in relation to one another. *Brahma* translates as the sublime being, *vihara* the abode or the dwelling place for the mind. Loving Kindness, along with *Compassion*, *Sympathetic Joy* and *Equanimity* are thought to be the great removers of tension, peace-makers in social conflict, and healers of wounds suffered in the struggle of existence. We cannot experience any of these states without the desire for humility. Humility rests upon our discovery and acceptance of something bigger, which varies from people to people, from culture to culture.

Imprisoned in his tiny cell, St John found faith and forgiveness, in his words: "all things ceased; I went out from myself, leaving my cares." In *Room for St John of the Cross*, Viola offers us the opportunity to know and experience not just the humility of St John but also that of the artist. He gives each of us the space to experience humility through presenting us with the sublimity of nature and the vulnerability of our corporeality. He also offers us succour through the mystical words of prayer, and the symbols of light radiating from the tiny structure, and water on the table.⁴

Listening is in itself an act of humility, it involves creating internal space for someone else, and/or for a deepening sense of self. Listening is also an act of surrender. One does not exert personal choice and listens with equal consideration to all that is offered. And so, Viola asks us to listen, to move through the chaos, and seek out, and embody the mystical words of St John, to create order out of that chaos.

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Last slide

⁴ Viola 'I relate to the role of the mystic in the sense of following a Via Negativa-of feeling the basis of my work to be in unknowing, in doubt, in being lost, in questions and not answers.'

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